

Conservation Security Program Comments
ATTN: David McKay
NRCS Conservation Operations Division
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, DC 20013

243

I am writing to suggest important changes to the USDA's proposed rules for the operation of the Conservation Security Program (CSP). I support the CSP as a nationwide conservation program focused on working farmlands and which would reward the best, and motivate the rest. As intended by Congress, the CSP should be open to all farmers in the U.S. practicing effective conservation.

First, USDA should issue a supplement to the rule, which would be open for public comment for 30 days. This should be done immediately to fix major problems with the proposed rules issued on January 2, 2004, which are not consistent with the law authorizing the CSP nor with the funding allocated by Congress making CSP an uncapped national entitlement program.

In addition,

1. USDA's preferred approach in the proposed rule would severely and unnecessarily prevent most farmers from gaining access to the CSP. USDA must adhere to the law, and to the recently appropriated full funding of CSP by Congress, and make CSP available nationwide to all farmers practicing effective conservation. The USDA needs to get rid of the idea of restricting sign-up for CSP to a few selected watersheds and undefined categories.
2. The USDA's proposed rules fail to make anywhere close to adequate payments for environmental benefits being produced by farmers currently practicing effective conservation. The best way to secure the vital conservation of our soil and other resources is to recognize and reward it when and where it is being done. Paying the best practitioners for results is sound economics and smart policy, providing both reward and motivation. CSP base payments should be set at the local rental rates based on land capability without the 90% reduction proposed by USDA. Enhanced payments should reward the most environmentally-beneficial systems and to the maximum extent possible pay for results. The enhanced payments should not be treated as cost-share but rather as real bonuses to reward exceptional performance.
3. CSP needs to recognize and reward resource-conserving crop rotations and managed rotational grazing as proven conservation farming systems that deliver environmental benefits to society. Both are specifically mentioned for enhanced payments in the CSP statute. The final rule should highlight substantial enhancement payments for these systems, as well as payments for management of existing practices.
4. USDA should not penalize farmers for shifting former cropland to pasture as part of a managed grazing system. Former or potential cropland that is pastured and put into a managed rotational grazing system must receive equal payment rates to other cropland, and not the lower rate of pastureland. The rules should establish base payments based on NRCS land capability classes, not current land use.
5. CSP should allow farmers with USDA-approved organic certification plans under the National Organic Program to simultaneously certify under both the National Organic Program and CSP, if they meet the standards of both. No need to tie farmers up in red tape.

Sincerely,



(Additional comments on back)



Additional Comments:

1. NRCS is seeking comments on the idea of a one-producer, one-contract approach to CSP contracts; as a way to provide the fairest treatment of all producers and to guard against program fraud and abuse. Do you agree with this approach? Do you agree that all CSP payments should also be attributed to real persons (not various corporate or business entities)? And do you agree that the payment limits set in the law (\$20,000 per year for Tier 1, \$35,000 per year for Tier 2, and \$45,000 per year for Tier 3) should be maintained?
2. NRCS is proposing that CSP contracts in general not be renewable, except in special circumstances. The law, on the other hand, leaves it up to the farmer to decide if he or she wants to renew the contract, and USDA would renew unless the farmer was not fulfilling the contract. Do you agree that CSP contracts should be renewable, as part of an ongoing program, and not limited to one-time contracts?
3. Your additional comments on CSP and the USDA's proposed rules:

Name (if not signed on front): _____

244

Conservation Operations Division
Natural Resources Conservation Service
ATTN: Conservation Security Program
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, DC 20013-2890

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As stated in the proposed rule, the USDA must issue a supplement to the rule, which would be open for public comment for 30 days. This should be done immediately to fix major problems with the proposed rules issued on January 2, 2004, which are not consistent with the law authorizing the CSP nor with the funding allocated by Congress making CSP an uncapped national entitlement program.

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Name (if not signed on front):

David W. W. W.

245

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ATTN: David McKay
NRCS Conservation Operations Division
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, DC 20013

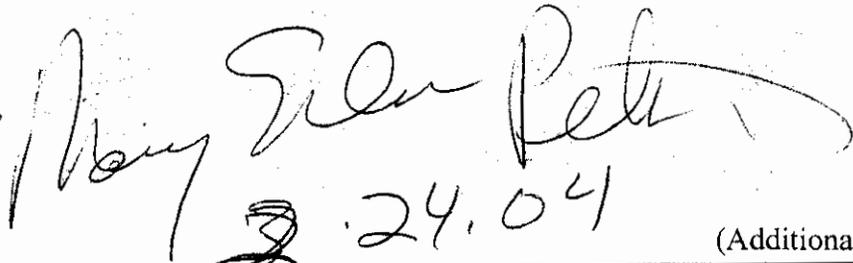
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24.04

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3. Your additional comments on CSP and the USDA's proposed rules:

surface water + ground
water health must be
restored.

Name (if not signed on front): _____

February 24, 2004

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Mr. David McKay, USDA
P.O. Box 2890,
Washington, DC 20013-2890

Dear Mr. McKay,

Attn: Conservation Security Program

I am writing to you regarding the Conservation Security Program Proposed Rule that is currently being reviewed by your office. The Conservation Security Program, as passed by Congress in 2002, would not only benefit all farmers, but would have an enormous positive impact on water quality throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed, and subsequently on the health of the Bay. However, the current proposed rule has significant shortcomings that will not allow CSP to reach full potential.

I urge you to revise the proposed rule to address the following:

* Eligibility: The current proposed rules make it very difficult for farmers to participate and will so severely limit eligibility that it will discourage future participation. The final rule needs to be written with the future in mind, so that the program can be expanded beyond the funding limitations of 2004. The law states that CSP is to be available to all qualifying farmers and ranchers, not limited to categories and subcategories. Also, the law states that the program will help farmers to attain high conservation standards, not that these standards are a prerequisite for participation. CSP should support farmers trying to reach the environmental standards of each tier, with realistic but effective requirements.

* Payment Structure: The proposed payment structure greatly limits the incentives available to farmers through CSP. As a result, very few farmers will view the program as worthwhile and be interested in pursuing the program at all. The rule must provide real rewards for exceptional stewardship and substantial incentives for farmers to continue to improve their environmental management.

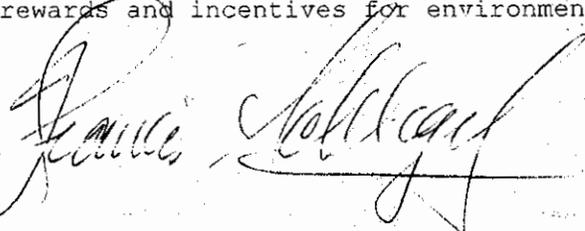
* Priority Watersheds: The rules should be written to make CSP available to all farmers across the nation when fully implemented. I support identifying priority watersheds in the initial year, and suggest selection at the state level based on environmental criteria, and so that each state has the opportunity to implement CSP across its major agricultural operation types, as well as topographic, geologic and environmental conditions.

* Resource Concerns: I support the proposed national resource concerns of water quality and soil quality. Within the Chesapeake watershed, water quality practices must be focused on nutrient runoff, which is the primary source of impairment for the Chesapeake Bay and the greatest water quality challenge for farmers in the region. The rule must define clear and effective criteria that ensure that environmental goals are achieved and that are understandable and workable for farmers.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide these comments. I believe that the Conservation Security Program will be one of the most important aspects of the 2002 Farm Bill and future farm programs. However, the proposed rule must be revised to provide all farmers with real and substantial rewards and incentives for environmental stewardship.

Sincerely,

Mr. Francis Schlegel
457 Coldstream Drive
Berwyn, PA 19312-1113



CC: Honorable Tom Gerlach
PA 6th, US House Representative